

Records Management

Introduction

The term records management can have two basic meanings:

1. **The collection of methods** — micrographics, files management, and inactive records storage — **used to control records**
2. **The specific processes of records control** — which include records inventory, records scheduling, and records disposition

The following section describes the basic records management processes of the second definition: inventory, scheduling, and disposition.

Records Management Objectives

The objectives of a records management program are to make records serve the purposes for which they were created as efficiently and economically as possible, and to provide for proper disposition after they have served their purposes. A records management program provides the means of controlling records beginning with creation or receipt, continuing through organization and maintenance, and concluding with disposition. The coordination of the records management process for state, county, and municipal governments in New Jersey is the work of the Bureau of Records Management, Division of Archives and Records Management, in the Department of State.

The Records Management Process

Records Inventory

Record holdings must be inventoried before appropriate controls can be instituted. An inventory is a complete listing of records by record series, together with necessary descriptions and supporting information. A record series is a group of identical or related records that are normally filed together, and that can be evaluated as a unit to determine how long they should be maintained. Examples of record series can be found in the “General Retention Schedule for All State Agencies.”

Inexperienced records analysts often overestimate the time needed to inventory records because they misunderstand the concept of a record series. Consider the common record series,

“correspondence.” For records inventory purposes, the analyst does not need to know the author, recipient, or subject of each letter or memorandum. This is equally true for any other examples of record series held by state offices, such as purchase orders, travel vouchers, cancelled checks, personnel records, etc. In all cases, the records inventory does not need to include the particular details of content.

The inventory should describe instead the general function and overall content of records. It should also identify the record medium (e.g., paper, magnetic tape, and floppy disk), size, filing method, reference rate, current volume, and annual accumulation. All of this information should be noted on a records series inventory form .

Although inventory data is used primarily for retention scheduling, it plays a crucial role in other aspects of managing records:

1. **Accumulation rates** are a factor in deciding whether to microfilm a record series.
2. **Filing methods** may illustrate problems with retrieval.
3. **Frequency of use** will determine when to place records in semicurrent storage.

Given the frequency with which data collection and processing requirements change, inventories and schedules should be reviewed every one to five years.

Division analysts usually conduct records inventories in state agencies on a periodic basis and are always available to aid state officials in reviewing their record holdings, adding or deleting items from existing retention schedules, or instituting records inventories for the first time. Brief planning and orientation sessions for agency staff, which summarize inventory techniques, procedures, and benefits, are available at no cost. Sessions may be arranged by visiting division offices or by requesting that a division records analyst visit agency offices.

Records Retention Schedules

After records are inventoried, they are placed on “records retention schedules.” Every record series on a schedule is assigned:

1. **An item number**
2. **A title and a brief description of function and contents**, including appropriate form numbers or applicable statutory references
3. **A retention period** — the length of time the record must be maintained and, in some cases, how long it may be kept in semicurrent storage in the New Jersey State Records Center
4. **A final disposition** — destruction, permanent maintenance by the office of origin, or transfer to the State Archives

The scheduling process is ongoing and involves close cooperation between the division and appropriate officials. Many state agencies have designated officials responsible for the records

management of their organizations. These officials usually work very closely with division analysts.

Most state agency and authority records have already been placed on retention schedules by division analysts. These schedules consist of:

1. Specific schedules that list record series that are unique to a particular, discrete subdivision of state government
2. The “General Records Schedule for All State Agencies,” which lists records that are common to most offices, e.g., correspondence, invoices, and personnel files. (It is important to note that the general schedule applies to all state agencies that are administered fiscally through the state treasury. Authorities and other fiscally independent organizations can elect to use the general schedule, or to have general schedule items listed in their specific schedules.)

As new records and forms are created or received, division analysts and appropriate agency contacts should update retention schedules. For many state agencies, records schedules are often established or amended when agencies begin using the State Records Center or request authorization for records disposal. The division is continuously appraising state government records and revising retention schedules.

Schedules are also used as evaluation tools in files management (see section VI), and microfilm system studies (see section V), as well as in general office efficiency reviews.

Schedule Approval Process

Once a new or changed record series has been identified, division analysts evaluate the record series in terms of:

1. **Legal and fiscal requirements** — relevant statutory laws, regulations, statutes of limitation, administrative and court decisions, and audit requirements
2. **Administrative requirements** — past precedents, usefulness in office management, and common sense
3. **Historical requirements** — evidence of significant actions or transactions that affect the public and are worthy of permanent preservation

Preliminary determinations of the length of time needed to retain records are based on these requirements. Division analysts submit a proposed schedule for review to the office maintaining the records as well as to offices whose authority and responsibilities bear on the matter.

After a schedule is reviewed and agreed upon by officials, it is submitted for approval to the State Records Committee. The committee (see section I-2) consists of representatives of the state attorney general, state auditor, state treasurer, director of local government services in the Department of Community Affairs, and director of the Division of Archives and Records Management in the Department of State. This body has final authority on matters involving public records, regardless of the record's medium, e.g., paper, microfilm, magnetic tape, floppy disks, optical disks, etc.

The State Records Committee reviews proposed retention schedules at their regularly scheduled meetings. Meetings are attended by division analysts as well as representatives from state agencies and authorities and are held in compliance with the open public meetings act.

State Records Committee approval ensures that retention periods satisfy all legal, fiscal, administrative, and historical obligations, thereby protecting the public interest. The committee either approves a schedule as presented, recommends changes and approves with changes, or withholds approval pending further information.

Once a proposed schedule has been approved, it is signed by the secretary of the State Records Committee, and becomes a legal, enforceable document that specifies the minimum amount of time a given record series must be held and indicates the manner of disposition after such a period has elapsed.

Schedule Publication

The division publishes the "General Records Schedule for All State Agencies" as well as specific retention schedules for individual offices. Providing that they exist, current copies of any state agency or authority schedule are available upon request. Updates of individual schedules and new schedules are provided to the effected agency after all approvals have been secured.

Schedule Amendments

Records schedules should be modified periodically to reflect the changing information requirements of government. The process of changing an existing retention schedule is the same as the approval process for new schedules. Changes can include any component of a record series: title, description, retention period, or disposition. Factors that may make revisions necessary include new legal, administrative, or fiscal requirements. Amendments are considered for any appropriate reason and can be initiated by contacting the division.

Records Disposition

Definition

Records can be disposed of in one of two ways:

1. **Physical destruction** — by shredding, burning, discarding, or recycling
2. **Transfer of ownership** — by awarding custody to the State Archives

Authorization Process

In order to legally dispose of records, state officials must fill out a "Request and Authorization for Records Disposal" form. The following information should be included on the form: record series title, item number, inclusive dates, retention period, and volume in cubic feet. Copies of the "Request and Authorization for Records Disposal" form are available from the division.

This form is legally required to document an official request for destruction. By signing and counter-signing this form, officials indicate their awareness of what they wish to discard. This process ensures that records earmarked for destruction have outlived their value to the public.

All requests submitted to the division are checked against current records retention schedules. Each record series appearing on a schedule is keyed to an item number with corresponding title, description, and retention and disposition requirements.

Unusual or unique situations, such as unscheduled records, are resolved through the monthly cycle of State Records Committee meetings. Officials who discover an unscheduled records series should notify the division to begin the scheduling process. This is critical if an agency or authority wishes to either store the records at the State Records Center or to dispose of them.

The division checks, approves, and returns a majority of disposal requests within a week of their receipt. For the remaining fraction, the division withholds authorization pending further clarification. Some common errors that result in approval delays are:

1. **Omission of necessary signatures** — All requests for records disposal must be signed by two officials from the requesting agency. Additionally, verification is required to acknowledge that fiscal records are not needed for future audits. For state agencies, the state auditor will review all fiscal records, while for authorities, their own auditor must sign off.
2. **Omission of microfilm certification letter** — For requests to destroy paper copies of microfilmed records, the law requires inclusion of a guarantee that microfilming has been conducted according to minimum quality and documentation standards .
3. **Incomplete information** — Inclusive dates, volume of material, or record series titles are not stated on request.
4. **Incorrect information** — Item numbers, record series titles, and retention periods listed do not correspond to the appropriate retention schedule

Remedying these errors is most often accomplished by telephone or by mailing omitted materials. In all cases where necessary signatures are missing from request forms, the division returns forms to the agency.

The “Request and Authorization for Records Disposal” form is printed in quadruplicate. After reviewing and granting a request, the division detaches the white “original” and keeps it permanently, while returning the pink “agency copy” to the requesting office, also for permanent maintenance. The state auditor (or the authority’s auditor) keeps the goldenrod copy. Once the records are actually disposed of, the requesting office mails the yellow or “follow up” copy back to the division. This “follow up” copy documents date and method of disposition and is attached to the “original” held by the division. This process is required of all state, county, and municipal government agencies and authorities.

The division’s review process quickly corrects minor errors, prevents loss of valuable documents and avoids potential legal and fiscal predicaments. Without this standard, central authorization process, every agency would have to develop its own records destruction policy and procedure.

By complying with the statewide destruction authorization process, individual agencies avoid liability for inconsistent or illegal records destruction. The division is able to ensure the legal disposal of records on a statewide basis through this single procedure and form, with a fast turnaround time for approval.

Benefits of Compliance

By using mandated, statewide procedures for legal disposal of records, state agencies and authorities gain a consistent policy with uniform standards. The benefits of systematic, legal disposition include:

1. **Economies** — avoidance or savings in purchase and maintenance of real estate, equipment and supplies, staff time
2. **Efficiencies** — increases in efficiency and safety through the removal of unnecessary files
3. **Liabilities** — removal of liability from agency for records destroyed

Additionally, use of the statewide disposal process may settle many legal questions that may arise.

Liabilities of Noncompliance

Premature disposal — destruction of records before their retention periods expire potentially endangers the public interest because of:

1. Unplanned expenses of financial settlements or loss of revenues
2. Disruption of efficiency due to gaps in information
3. Irretrievable loss of historical legacy
4. Unfavorable litigation

Lack of disposal — continued maintenance of unneeded, out-of-date records will result in:

1. Unnecessary expenditures for real estate, equipment, and supplies
2. Inefficiencies as old record accumulations become unwieldy and unfamiliar (see sections III & VI)
3. Safety hazards due to haphazard and dangerous storage methods

Summary

A records management program begins by conducting a records inventory to gain knowledge of holdings necessary for creating records retention schedules. Retention schedules summarize information about individual record series and designate minimum lengths of time records must be

held in active and semiactive storage. Retention schedules also designate when and how a record may be disposed.

Timely and consistent records disposition results in increases in safety and efficiency and decreases in record-keeping expenses. Use of the statewide disposal authorization process helps to eliminate inconsistent records destruction, thereby minimizing the likelihood of adverse legal, administrative, fiscal, and historical impact.

Aiding state officials and their staff with records management is the work of the records and forms analysis section of the division. The section offers advice to state offices, including on-site consultations, without charge. Analysts serve as a communication link between state agencies and authorities and the State Records Committee.

To obtain assistance, call the Bureau of Records Management at (609) 530-3200 or write: New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management, 2300 Stuyvesant Avenue, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey, 08625.